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***A bill in Congress would provide \$3 million for a health-services pilot program in South Jersey.***

By Edward Colimore  
Inquirer Staff Writer

When she heard about the proposal, Lt. Col. Terese Acocella liked it immediately. Health care specifically attuned to thousands of women in the military simply makes sense, she said.

After 25 years in the New Jersey Army National Guard, including a year in Iraq, Acocella knows the needs of female service members - and how different they are from those of their male counterparts.

A \$3 million pilot program, part of the defense appropriations bill that Congress is considering, would establish a Women Veterans and Service Members Joint Health Resource Center in South Jersey.

The effort, which could be replicated across the country, would provide "navigators" to connect women in the military and female veterans to health care, including gynecological, obstetric, and breast exams, available through the Department of Veterans Affairs and civilian facilities.

Proposed by Virtua, the South Jersey nonprofit health system, it also would provide information and referrals for treatment of traumatic brain injuries and behavioral health programs for issues ranging from stress to trauma from sexual assault.

Female veterans "may not have health insurance through a job and may not be married and have spousal insurance," said Acocella, 45, of Hunterdon County, a member of the state's Commission on Women Veterans, which assesses female veterans' needs and the programs required to meet them.

"There are veterans who are senior citizens with limited health insurance," she added.

The women's program proposal was developed over more than a year during meetings between Virtua representatives; Col. Gina Grosso, commander of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst; and U.S. Rep. John Adler (D., N.J.).

It passed the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense in July and must go before the full House and Senate for approval before going to the president.

More than 200,000 of the 1.5 million members of the military are women, Defense Department officials said, a proportion that has been rising. Twenty percent of new recruits are women, officials said.

The female veteran population also is growing. The Department of Veterans Affairs provided health care to more than 281,000 women in 2008, an increase of 12 percent from 2006, and an additional 17 percent increase was projected by 2033, according to a federal Government Accounting Office report.

With these statistics come more cases of sexual trauma, divorce, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other health problems involving women, prompting federal officials to look at other avenues of care.

"Our grateful country can do more to honor our women veterans," said Adler, who has pushed for funding of the resource center and who will provide a follow-up report on the effort to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

About 13,500 female veterans live in South Jersey, said Stephen Kolesk, vice president and chief operating officer at Virtua Memorial Hospital in Mount Holly. The median age of female veterans nationally is 47; the median for male vets is 61.

"We are very involved taking care of warriors coming through the Joint Base," Kolesk said. "It's a major demobilizing center, and women veterans come with their significant special needs."

Virtua's "strengths are in women's health programs," said Stephanie Fendrick, assistant vice president for Virtua's Women's and Children's Programs of Excellence.

"We can navigate them to services at Virtua and the VA," she said. "There may be gaps, and we would work to fill the need."

The resource center would be developed with the Warrior Transition Program at the Joint Base, but its location or locations have not been determined, Kolesk said.

"Research will have to determine where women are and what level of service needs there are in a given community," said Richard Miller, Virtua's president and chief executive officer.

If Congress votes to fund the pilot program, "we're talking about dollars that we hope will be allocated for 2011," said Fred Hipp, Virtua's vice president of government relations.

"We expect the vote will come later this year, before this Congress ends its work."